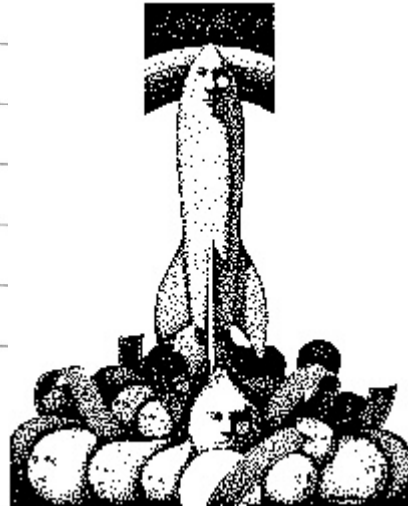
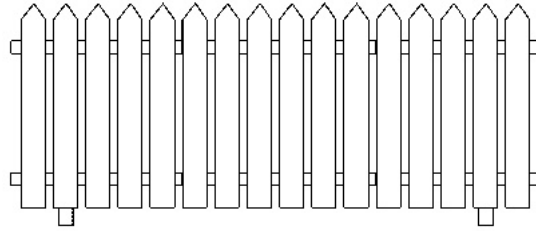


"the Z Ø NE
envelopes him"



or
preterites
in
pedestrian





I had the luxury of growing up in a suburban subdivision where you could create a ruckus almost bi-nightly and return home completely unscathed. You just needed to know which turns to make, and when to to run when you saw headlights.

Midwestern Americas, somewhere in between farmlands and plazas sprawling out into random splotches of woodlands littered with bodies of water too small to call ponds.

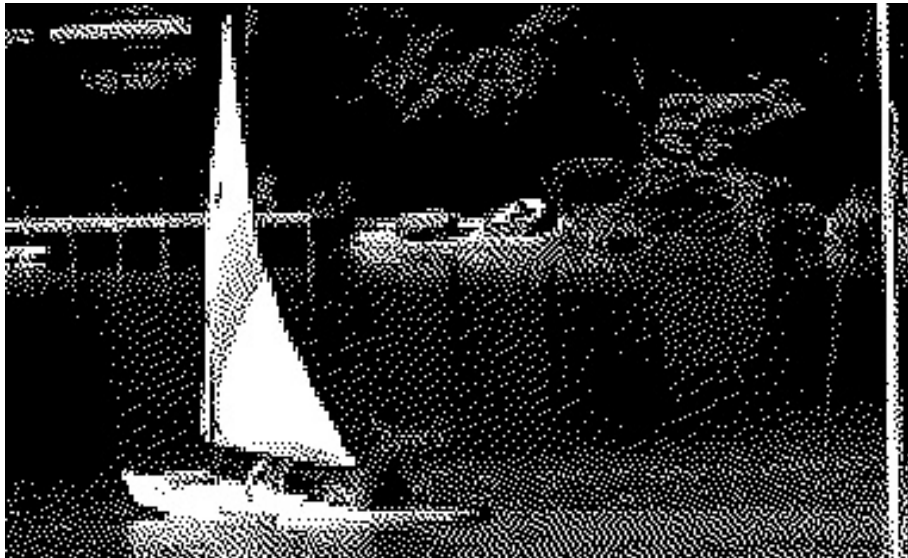
The subdivision was a blessing and a curse to our adolescence: streets almost always empty shortly after dark, but half of the neighborhood populated by the type of older folks who would call the cops if you didn't use your turn signal while driving by. It really did leave a strange feel of panopticism – we would slink around with our games but we knew we could always count on someone watching from any window of the bunched-up houses. This was always seen as a chore to my friends and myself, who at the age wanted nothing more than to fuck off and have a good time when the sun went down. Frequent activities often involved drinking in public, “wars” with bottle rockets, whipping pieces of pavement at street signs as loudly as we could, and doing donuts in empty lots/parks – anything of such cretinous nature.

There was one gentlemen in particular who would grow to become the largest force against our existence as caution-to-the-wind nightwalkers – let's call him Hobey. We were first accosted by Hobey (if I am remembering correctly) well before we had become the bastard teenagers of the neighborhood. There were some “private beaches” around a small man-made lake; tax-payers within the subdivision were able to enter with the key their family was given. A friend of mine had a nice little two-person (although sometimes even three of us would cram in it together) sailboat that we liked to take out on windy days.

“Where are your stickers?”, he asked. “What?” “Your stickers. For your boat. You need stickers.”

We couldn't have even been at the beach for more than 10 minutes at this point. We noticed he was carrying a pen and pad of paper in his hands. As we tried to explain to him that we had our required stickers, he began looking at our boat and jotting something down on the pad.

We were able to take the boat out to the shoreline and depart, but we could see him watching in the distance, just standing there for enough time to make the whole sailing thing too uncomfortable to enjoy. Eventually he left, and we realized that he lived in a house directly across this beach entrance. “What was that all about?”



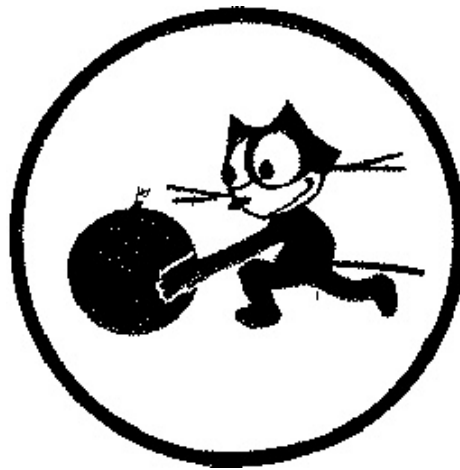
I remember later talking to another friend in the neighborhood who mentioned being accosted by the same man at the same beach when he was younger. He was headed to the beach with his friend and their mom, who realized she had forgotten the key to the gate when she got there and was going to head back. Her kid just reached through the gate to open the door (poor security at the time) to save everyone another walk back and forth. Hobey must have been watching already, because he came out to lecture the mother – shouting “you shouldn't train your kid to do that.” “Train.”

The mother replied:

“You think I’m training him like some kind of dog?!”

There was an eventual fizzling out of emotions and the situation gradually dissipated into nothingness, but my friend recalls being shocked. How did he see it happen so fast? From where?

The boat stickers incident was a tame encounter. We would all personally see more of Hobey to come. He would become a legend of our stomping grounds – the man stationed at his upstairs windows, binoculars drawn to his face whenever there were shrill voices heard outside.



”..is he drifting?”– Page 556
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Thomas Pynchon has a way of blending the starkness of paranoia with the hilarity of it all. I have never read anything that conveyed this in a more poignant fashion than Gravity’s Rainbow.

In the novel, a series of characters find themselves preoccupied by all sorts of conspiracies towards the tail-end (and shortly after the end) of World War II. One of the main elements of the story involves competing theories of the German V2 rockets and why they end up landing where they do.

Gravity's Rainbow – like much of Pynchon's work – peppers both conspiracy theories and conspiracy practice (actually proven events such as the Phoebus Cartel) through-out, a winding wonderful mess of constantly checking your back for a tail, wondering if you've seen that face on the side of the road nearby before, using near-mnemonics to monitor the license plates of nearby cars, and wondering if something is rotten luck or... planned obsolescence.

Through the calamity of a never ending list of characters, the story ebbs and flows back to a particular character, Slothrop, (and others') paranoia – a paranoia of the megalomaniac. It is not quite the narcissism that you would find in a Psych textbook on personality disorders, its the type wrought by a particular type of environment. An environment where you are chasing something – what the existentialists refer to as a “project” – so entirely cumbersome it could crush you and most of what you know. And that's what it feels like when you walk away from it. A self importance taught by being asked to work against impending doom.



You chase and you build until the job is done, and then you are left delirious.

Towards the end of the Second Part of Gravity's Rainbow and into the Third, Slothrop is a character who becomes increasingly paranoid during his time in Europe. His colleagues have left him and he is set adrift into a sea of uncertainty. Yes, my friends are gone and most of my work is done, but there are people out chasing me and ..I have people I need to chase myself, come to think of it. This all takes place in some land within post-war Europe referred to in the book as “The Zone”. It is a place of confusion for Slothrop and many others who may have felt more of a sense of purpose earlier on in the war. “..here in the Zone categories have blurred badly.”

Without spoiling too much of the story, there is something particularly special about this work and particularly the person who created it. Pynchon served in The U.S. Navy in the mid-1950s. He was an Engineer with a knack for math and physics. After his service, he was employed by Boeing to do much technical writing for their CIM-10 Bomarc missile system – as well as the SAGE system, its underlying network that allowed automated control and communication between missiles, as well as missile detection and interception features. This system would be greatly touted during the Cold War.

It's argued that some of the protocols in the SAGE system were used as inspiration for how ARPANET functioned, which led to DARPA and eventually the internet as we know it today, pushing packets back and forth globally.

You can imagine the inspirations drawn by Pynchon within these corridors, and also the paranoia.



“..what is this place doing to his brain?”– Page 333”
#

Hobey was really losing his cool now. He was probably tired of ignorant teenagers and their games. The next time someone “ding-dong-ditched” his house or set off fireworks near the beach entryway, he would be ready.

It was one of those early summer nights where school was coming to a close and we maybe felt like we had a little less to lose. A friend of a friend was there. Let’s call him Pete. Another friend of mine was nagging on Pete to go knock on Hobey’s front door and walk away. Pete definitely had a more shy demeanor than my friend and I, but he thought it might be fun and we figured the egging-on was maybe a little healthy for someone like him.

Pete came running from Hobey’s doorstep after the frantic rapping at the door and fumbled toward the bike he had ridden to meet us with. He wasn’t fast enough. Hobey came out and snatched the baseball cap off of his head. Our shield of darkness was shattered as soon as the camera flash went off the first time. And then the second and third. It had an effect on the lot of us, but none more than Pete. He was in full disorientation, enough for Hobey to grab hold of the bike he rode in on.

It is very hard for me to recollect any exact exchange of words, or most of what was said by Hobey, in all honesty. He continued to take photos of us as best as he could, and I do remember him mentioning something about how he knew we were “the ones” who did something or other (maybe true, maybe not).

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"..corrupted, given up on, creeps over the face of the Zone.." – Page
627

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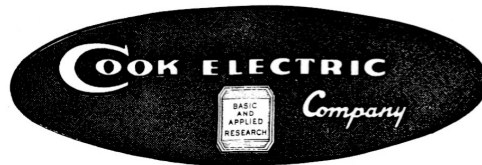
There were other run ins with Hobey – before and after Pete lost his cap. None of them were as direct, but they all left a little mark in our minds. Usually it was him coming out – whether we were just standing around benignly or if we had been up to something more stupid – and demanding to know what we were doing. Those moments consistently ended in a bit of a flicker of laughter and sprinting away.

Years rolled by. My friends and I moved on, moved out – school, full-time jobs, etc. We all kind of randomly returned once and while back to the subdivision. We noticed that the Man In The Window had gone missing from his post. We assumed the worst and we were right.

The obituary read that Hobey enlisted in the Navy at the end of WWII. He was an Engineer with a knack for physics. Who knows, maybe Pynchon or him may have seen the other's name on some mundane file tossed upon their desk a few times. But what came as the more remarkable revelation after Hobey's death stemmed from his work just before joining the Navy.

In high school, Hobey worked as an Engineer for a company called Cook Electric in Chicago. Cook Electric was stationed at a warehouse where, suddenly in the early 1940s, the United States Government and Armed Forces decided they needed some inconspicuous hubs for the development of the production of plutonium. It was later decided that certain facilities – including the one Hobey worked at – would be used as research and development hubs for the project as well. This would be infamously known as Manhattan Project.

Research and development. Nuclear War.



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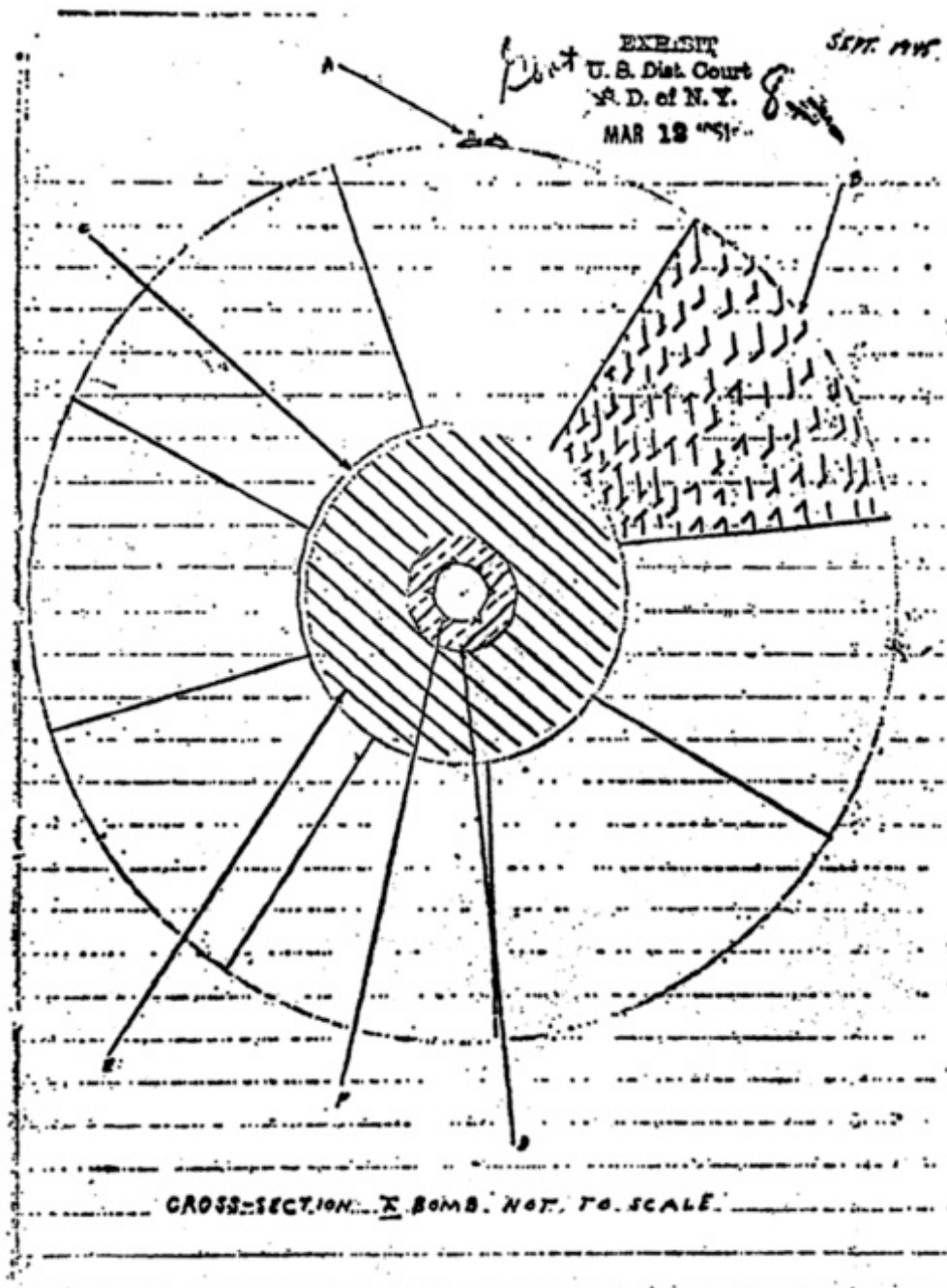
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Chemists
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Radiation physicists
Mechanical engineers
Mathematicians

A “project” that ends but never really does now, does it. If you aren’t careful enough, it can become an all-consuming “essence ensuing existence”.

Hobey’s family had alleged in the obituary that he didn’t know the details of the secretive project that the government had them cooking up during his time with the company, but he was sworn to secrecy with his work. Only after the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the workers fully informed. But you have to wonder..



Slothrop is gone but you can still hear some rockets screaming. Who knows where they might land.

A memorium is erected for Hobey, in a creek surrounded by a fence with "NO TRESPASSING" signs that keep getting stolen and replaced, one by one.

There are so many times I find myself reflecting on our strange encounters with Hobey. We cannot assume that his entire existence within our subdivision – our own "The Zone" - was a product of the environment writ nuclear secrecy, but its hard not to feel like the fact brings some clarity to the situations we experienced with him. And yet it sill begs more questions.

Can you live your life the same way after being part of a massive secret program? What kind of paranoia does this inject into a mind? What kind of paranoia do you leave with? What changes? It is hard for me to be judgmental for those who somewhat unknowingly toil over the research and creation of the components of a weapon of massive destruction. What makes you rest assured after something like that? Maybe you either learn to laugh at the absurdity of certain situations or else you approach them in such dour seriousness that you find an eventual comfort - an attempt at the complicity of yore.

I look back and I don't necessarily regret living my teenage years the way I did. But I do think about how many of these situations involving Hobey could have been handled differently. This is not to say he was absolved from being the absolute worse type of "neighborhood watch" personality, however I would have felt and perhaps reacted differently had I known then what I know now.

Towards the beginning of Part 3 of Gravity's Rainbow, Slothrop begins a new project in "The Zone". He feels as though it is different than the others, more of a wild goose chase than ever. The seeds of doubt are growing into obnoxious weeds.

"Rain drips, soaking into the floor, and Slothrop perceives that he is losing his mind. If there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long. Well right now Slothrop feels himself sliding onto the anti-paranoid part of his cycle, feels the whole city around him going back roofless, vulnerable, uncentered as he is.." – Page 434



Maybe when we tear away from a place of complicity, secrecy and discipline, and when we are left somewhere completely different than that, things become too disjointed. The constant stench of paranoia clears and you are left with a mind tainted by the scent, but less tangible threats of conspiracy.

You might see yourself as having been a preterite in pedestrian, a scary thought. One you might fight against?

Maybe most in the situation use this as a justification for their reactions. A tightening of the reigns, a need for full control of your domain and a warning to any trespassers.

Maybe where the “religious” glimmer of connected events and an eventual tripping into circular reasoning has been clouded over, you are forced to work your way around a new and unfamiliar terrain. And you can’t help but be too careful there, who knows the type of people you might run into. Or might run into you. No, the dots aren’t connected. But.. is that all part of a plan? A plot?

Who was chasing who here, anyways?

